THE BOY JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

Luke 2:41–52

Key Verse: 2:49

“And he said to them, ‘Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’”

Who is most important to you? Who takes priority over everyone and everything else? For most of us it changes over the course of life. When we’re little, our parents are most important to us. As teenagers, it shifts to our peers. When we become adults, we’re out to forge our own identity, and we tend to put ourselves first. When we’re married, our spouse comes first, and when we have children, they tend to become our top priority. It seems only natural, but is it right? In today’s passage we find a unique account describing Jesus at the age of 12. There are several interesting and important lessons here. His parents’ devotion is one. The boy Jesus’ interest in learning is another. His submission to his parents is a third. But the key point of today’s passage is in his spoken words: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” What did he mean? And what could his words possibly mean to us in our practical lives today? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word.

Today’s passage comes at the end of two chapters that delve into the details Jesus’ birth. His birth was unusual, in various ways. His young mother became pregnant with him without a man, by the Holy Spirit. There was a similar unusual birth of his relative, John, who, strangely, was born to very old parents, had an unusual name and a special mission to prepare the way for him. There were visitations from angels and words of prophecy. And a stunning detail was that when he was born, Jesus was placed in a manger, indicating severe poverty and social isolation. Nearby shepherds came and told their story of how angels had appeared to them, announcing good news of great joy that he was born as our Savior, Messiah and Lord. Despite all these unusual circumstances, Mary and her husband Joseph were careful to keep God’s commands: they had him circumcised on the eighth day, they gave him the name Jesus, which the angel had told them, and, as he was Mary’s firstborn son, they went to present him to the Lord in the temple, where two more unusual individuals spoke prophecies about him. Now, at the end of all this, we fast forward to when Jesus was twelve years old (42a).

Look at verse 41. Luke again emphasizes the devotion and faithfulness of Jesus’ parents. They kept the Passover every year. They both went, even though women were not required to go. By this point, in addition to Jesus, Mary and Joseph had other younger boys and girls also (Mk6:3). Some young families would stay in Jerusalem only for the Passover meal, not the entire week of festivities. But Jesus’ family stayed until everything was over (43a). People who study early childhood development agree that the environment in the home has a huge impact on little ones. As his parents Mary and Joseph did one important thing: they made an environment in their home of focusing on God and keeping his words. The Jewish custom was for twelve-year-old boys to join their parents in keeping the Passover (42b). At this time such boys would receive more thorough education in the Jewish religion before their bar mitzvah at age 13.

Though everything was going according to custom, something unusual happened yet again. Read verse 43. Jesus didn’t go home with his parents. They were unaware of it. We can just imagine how busy they were with their young family, and they had a unique chance on the trip home to have fellowship with their adult family and friends. Joseph and Mary may have been traveling separately and assumed Jesus was with the other parent. When they stopped traveling for the night, they discovered that Jesus was not with them. They checked all the places where their relatives and acquaintances were settled for the night, and still, no Jesus. They had to wait until morning to turn around and go back to Jerusalem, another day’s journey, to try and find him. The word “search” is repeated twice, and it means “to seek for diligently.” Anyone who has had a missing child even for a little while can relate to the nightmare of their experience. Later, Mary describes it as “great distress” (48b), which literally translates as “severe mental trauma.” Where they started looking when they got to Jerusalem isn’t stated, but it probably was where you would expect boys his age to be—with other children playing in the marketplace. Again, no Jesus. Where was he?

Look at verse 46. Where he’d been staying at night or getting his meals is not even discussed. On the surface this scene at the temple, with teachers sitting and discussing the Scriptures, is rather ordinary and peaceful, quite a contrast to the inner state of Jesus’ parents. Most boys Jesus’ age would never have thought of going there; they would’ve had to have been dragged into it. But the boy Jesus is there of his own free will, and it seems he’s been there the whole three days. Listening to Bible teachers and asking questions for three whole days? That’s intense. It shows his voracious desire to learn the Bible, even at twelve. He’s so into it that he seems to have forgotten all about his parents.

There’s another unusual element. Look at verse 47. The boy Jesus is not just listening, not just repeating all the rote answers the teachers expected. He’s asking questions and, through his own questions and answers, he’s exhibiting a profound understanding. Another group of people there are observing what’s going on. Luke tells us they “were amazed at his understanding and his answers.” It wasn’t just one Q&A exchange; it kept going and going. Maybe each day the crowd was getting bigger. Without any formal training the boy Jesus could go so deep. Partly it’s a testimony to the spiritual education his parents had already given him. By now he was thoroughly familiar with the Scriptures and must’ve discussed them with his parents often, asking all the hard “why” questions. Clearly the boy Jesus was gifted, and as this event shows, even more.

So how do his parents react? Look at verse 48a. Here the word “astonished” is powerful. Literally it means “knocked over” or “blown away.” It wasn’t just because their twelve-year-old boy is there, but because they can hear, like everybody else, what he’s saying. Obviously he had not talked like this around them before. In verse 48b his mother mildly rebukes him. Of course it’s good that he’s so eager to discuss the word of God. But leaving them without notice and staying in Jerusalem without them is unacceptable to her. With the word “Son,” she emphasizes that he’s her child. And she shares that she and his father Joseph have been traumatized. All mothers can understand her.

How does the boy Jesus respond? Let’s read verse 49 again. Basically he’s telling his parents, “Where else did you expect me to be? Naturally I had to be here.” In Greek “in my Father’s house” literally is “where my Father is.” Up to this point God has been in the Jerusalem temple in a very special way (2Ch7:16). In another sense, God is everywhere (Ac17:28). But the point here isn’t the *place*; it’s the *who*—who he’s with. He’s not with his human parents; he’s with his Father God. And this is how it’s supposed to be.

There’s a message here for all parents. We need to do our best for our children, but at some point it’s healthy to let go and entrust them to God himself. The even bigger idea here is Jesus’ identity. He’s become aware of his special relationship with God even at the age of twelve. God is his Father, and he is God’s Son. This relationship with his Father God is most important to him. It takes priority even over his parents. We also notice the word “must” here. It’s a special word to the author Luke, which he repeats often in relation to Jesus (4:43; 5:38; 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 19:5; 22:37; 24:7,44). As God’s Son, Jesus is not free to do as he pleases, as most human beings live. The Father has a special plan, a special purpose, a special assignment for him. And as his loving Son, he’s not reluctant; he’s wholly committed to it (Ps40:8; Heb10:7).

Jesus’ relationship with the Father is unique. But in another sense, he’s our example. As we develop a more personal relationship with God, we begin to discover not only that he’s our loving heavenly Father, but also that he has a special plan, purpose and will for our own lives. In all the ups and downs of life, all its demands and pressures, discouragements and enticements, we’ve got to figure out who we are and what we’re really doing here. Who and what are most important to me? It’s not theoretical; it’s demonstrated in our daily priorities, decisions, and in where and what we spend most of our time. Sometimes, making God and his will our top priority is hard for others in our lives to accept. Later Luke records how in the midst of a very busy ministry Jesus’ mother and brothers come to reach him, but can’t do so because of the crowd. When people tell him about it, he answers: “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (8:19–21). Later he puts it even more strongly: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (14:26). Matthew puts it more mildly, saying “loves father or mother more than me” (10:37). Luke uses this extreme word “hate” to say in the strongest terms possible what our top priority has to be. Even as a boy of twelve, with the words “I must be in my Father’s house,” Jesus is exemplifying such a spiritual priority and commitment. His consciousness of his relationship with the Father and of his will for him came from his deep study of Scripture. Likewise, only as we delve deeply into God’s word can such consciousness and commitment become our own.

At the time, his parents couldn’t understand (50). Look at verse 51. Two things stand out here. First is the boy Jesus’ submission to his parents. He understood spiritual things better than they did. But he was submissive to them. He honored them and learned from this relationship how to be submissive to his Father God also. His submission is another key lesson for us. The second thing in this verse is his mother Mary. Again, though she doesn’t fully understand, she is treasuring up all these things in her heart (2:19). We all need to learn from her.

Read verse 52. Luke describes here the full humanity of Jesus. Just like all young people, he “increased” or “grew”—both physically and spiritually. He was healthy both in wisdom and stature. He grew in favor with God due to how he treasured this love relationship with him. And he grew in favor with the people around him because he was so humble, submissive and loving. It was this perfect man Jesus who had to give his life for our sins.

Let’s read verse 49 again. May God help each one of us to grow in such a close love relationship with him, and in such a commitment to him and to doing his will. May he bless our families to make such a good spiritual environment in their homes. And may he bless our young people to truly crave his word and grow in his grace as our Lord Jesus did.